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Symbolic Significance in the Stories of Raymond Carver

Daniel W. Lehman

1 Raymond Carver's literary reputation to date illustrates a rather common critical problem: the misreading of an author's message for his underlying aesthetic theory. Because so many Carver short stories present spare glimpses of characters snared in a tattered web of relationships and events whose significance they cannot understand, critics have often assumed that Carver, the artist, also refuses to endow the facts and events in his fiction with underlying significance. Much Carver criticism, therefore, finds in his minimal style evidence of postmodern distress, the refusal of the artist to bring a pattern-making vision to the debris of contemporary life (Chénetier 189; German and Bedell 257; Saltzman 9-10).

2 A second strain of Carver criticism grows out of that misreading and argues that Carver rejected his postmodern vehicle after he published *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (Facknitz, "The Calm" 387-388; Shute 1; Stull 6). These readers suggest that Carver, with *Cathedral*, somehow traded in a rather battered minimalism for a shiny new humanist realism guaranteed to add new mileage to his writing. One recent commentator, in fact, even posits a rather curious sort of "postmodern humanism" by which Carver is supposed to reject referential significance for a surface-bound postmodern fiction while at the same time he manages to reveal to his characters (and readers) not only "what a cathedral means," but even the awareness of "spiritual being" (Brown 131, 136).

3 A careful examination of Carver's underlying theory of facts suggests an antidote to the current critical confusion. This examination shows that while Carver may have deepened his characterization, plots, and themes during his career, his rhetorical rein over objects and events – as well as over the destinies of his characters – has always been significant and deeply controlling, an aesthetic that is anything but either postmodern or humanistic.

4 In fact, if a more humanistic Carver emerges in his later writings, the change does not come between the spare, tightly managed pessimism of "The Bath" and the almost

sentimentally optimistic, but just as tightly managed, "A Small Good Thing" – which, like "Cathedral," differs from its predecessor in tone and theme but not in aesthetic principle. Only in "Where I'm Calling From" does Carver seem to surrender his overt rhetorical control and free his characters and his readers to grope together toward less tightly controlled themes.

5 Typical of those critics who have read Carver as a representative of postmodern distress are Marc Chénetier, who devoted a chapter to Carver in his collection of contemporary European criticism, and Arthur M. Saltzman, who has published the only book-length criticism of Carver to date. Chénetier speaks of Carver's "refusal of metaphor" in charting a resolutely post-modern course for Carver. He contends that Carver's texts "retain a flatness and an indeterminacy, an untranslated quality of experience that at the most allows for illustrative similes but will not resort to metaphorical mutation" (186-187). Similarly, Saltzman argues that Carver's fiction, and indeed all minimalism, properly belongs in "another post-modern tributary" because it suspects "the referential adequacy of words" (9-10). Saltzman contends that Carver's fiction "parallels the notorious distrust of totalization observed by Mas'ud Zavarzadeh in *The Mythopoeic Reality* and evident throughout the terrain of postmodern fiction" (14).

6 By invoking Zavarzadeh, Saltzman relies on a post-structural theorist of the non-fiction novel, an advocate of the experimental "recorded transcript" fictions of Andy Warhol, of Tom Wolfe's psychedelic cadences in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test,* as well as of other journalistic experiments of the 1960s. A hybrid "fact-fiction," Zavarzadeh argues, creates a "fictual" world that "exterminates as far as possible the pattern-making mind of the artist" (47). Moreover: "facts are not used to establish or unveil an order but are allowed to enact, in their totality and entirety, the ambiguity, unpredictability, and disorder – in short, the entropy – of the actual" (66).

7 Carver's characters might on occasion face facts that way, but their creator never does. With virtually no exceptions, even the most minimally developed fictions of Carver reveal a meticulously crafted order in which facts offer reliable symbolic guideposts for the reader. In fact, his symbolic strategy resolves ambiguity rather than creating it: an exactly contradictory movement to the phenomenon observed by Zavarzadeh within the experimental non-fiction novels (66).

8 "Preservation" is one story often cited as representative of Carver's post-modernism: most likely because its bare-bones language explores the theme of entropy, which has been well-trod postmodern turf at least since the early writings of Thomas Pynchon. But Carver's symbolic structure in the story is unambiguous and carefully developed. Symbolic facts have fixed referents; their use is consistent and reliable. The characters may not understand their significance, but Carver expects his ideal reader to make sense of those symbols. Why else would Sandy's out-of-work husband come home and announce that he has been "canned" in a story called "Preservation" (*Cathedral* 35)? Why else would Carver cause the husband to find a book, *Mysteries of the Past*, and open up the book to the exact page that summarizes his dilemma – a petrified man with shriveled hands and feet who is discovered lying in a peat bog (36)? Peat is partly decayed, moisture-absorbing plant matter found in ancient swamp (Webster 994). Why else would Carver mention Sandy's husband's feet in the context of a pool of leaking water no less than three times in the last paragraph of the story (46)? Why else would Sandy burn a pork chop until it looks like the piece of charcoal her husband will become (46)? Why else, indeed, would

she be named Sandy if not to distinguish her, at least temporarily, from the peat bog that is enclosing her husband?

9 The symbolic images are far more than occasional similes (Chénetier 186-187); they are metaphorical structures that reinforce the story's thematic patterns of swamp and entropy. Things are leaking everywhere – the refrigerator's Freon, melted ice cream, cole slaw and hamburger, the exhaust from Sandy's father's car (39). The once-frozen packages on the table are leaking onto the husband's soon-to-be-shriveled feet. The once-meaningful form of the pork chop is leaking into the form of a man's shoulder blade or a digging instrument such as that used to unearth a petrified man (46). The husband's waking hours are leaking into his sleep and his sleep into his waking. In fact, everything is leaking but the story's symbolic structure; the characters fairly swim in meaningful symbols. Although the story's *theme* explores how the will to live and prevail can leak toward entropy, the story's *symbolic structures* are fixed.

10 Similarly, in "Chef's House," another so-called "minimal" tale from the *Cathedral* collection, the symbolic structures are as neat as carefully arranged bookends. The reader who observes the story's meteorological signs suspects that Wes and Edna's new lease on life is in trouble the moment that "clouds hung over the water" (29) as Chef comes to revoke their lend-lease. These meteorological signs are contrasted to those moments when Wes and Edna are happy and fishing in fresh-water lagoons. Then, the last thing Edna will remember "would be clouds passing overhead toward the central valley" (29) away from their coastal paradise. But when Wes signals his resignation to her near the end of the story, clouds, not surprisingly, "are building up" (31). In fact, symbols of nature assail the reader from the story's first paragraph, when a hopeful Wes boasts that "you can see the ocean from the front window" (27). Then, in the final paragraph, "Wes got up and pulled the drapes and the ocean was gone just like that" (33). Edna, who as narrator seems attuned to many subtle signs in her relationship to Wes, never questions the significance of the weather patterns in the story; they remain under Carver's control. Nor does Carver encourage the reader to believe that Edna might be mistaken about either the weather or its significance. If he did, if he encouraged the reader, however subtly, to question the tyranny of symbolic significance over his characters' lives, then "Chef's House" could be read as postmodern semiotic critique. But that irony is never developed. Ultimately, then, the theme of "Chef's House" may concern disintegration, but the symbolic structures with which Carver conveys that theme certainly are in no danger of collapse.

11 Although there is ample evidence of tightly managed symbolic structures in even the most spare, pessimistic stories of *Cathedral*, the collection, admittedly, is Carver's most expansive book. Yet *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, the collection that many critics believe represents the apex of Carver's minimalism (German and Bedell) as well as his "post-modernism" (Salzman; Chénetier), reveals rhetorical strategies that are just as tightly controlled.

12 Even in "Popular Mechanics," Carver's morbid tale in which two nameless characters play tug-of-war for their child, Carver keeps a steady hand on the rheostat that illuminates his symbolic structure and uses that structure to establish underlying significance. From the first paragraph onward, snow melts, water runs down the windows, and the cars spew slush (*What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* 123). It is getting dark outside, Carver is careful to tell us, then adds in what is certainly a symbolic comment on his character's moral dilemma: "But it was getting dark on the inside too" (123). As the man and woman

scuffle for the baby, they knock over a flowerpot, which seems to contain no flower (124), even as their house will contain no baby. Not surprisingly, as their struggle threatens to rip the infant apart, Carver shrouds their violence in darkness: "The kitchen window gave no light. In the near-dark he worked on her fisted fingers with one hand and with the other hand he gripped the screaming baby up under an arm near the shoulder" (125).

13 Although "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," the story, presents more developed characters and narrative, its symbolic structure works in virtually the same way. The four characters are introduced as sunlight "filled the kitchen from the big window behind the sink" and ice is neatly contained in a nearby ice bucket (137). We learn that what the characters talk about when they talk about love is bungled suicide, physical suffering, drunken driving, revenge, recriminations. The only remotely hopeful theme, that of the old couple whose love is challenged by an automobile accident, is discarded in drunken babble (151-152) as surely as the flowerpot tumbles in "Popular Mechanics." As the two couples talk about everything *but* love, ice melts, glasses overturn, liquid splashes from containers and seeks its level. Meanwhile, the light that at one point "was like a presence in this room, the spacious light of ease and generosity" (144) soon is draining out of the room, going back through the window where it had come from" (152). When the gin runs out, human noise is all there is: "not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark" (154). But even as the scene devolves toward darkness and his characters' significant speech collapses toward noise, Carver maintains and underscores the continuing significance of the story's symbolic structure. Without question, he expects his ideal reader to catch the rhetorical significance of that fixed and meaningful structure.

14 That impulse, of course, runs exactly counter to Brown's contention that "there is no resource of significant events" (131) or to the postmodern aesthetic that Saltzman relies on Zavarzadeh to explain. Facts in Carver's fictions *are* used to create referential meaning, even if that meaning is bleak. Ambiguity, at least on the symbolic level, is resolved. The stories' themes might be entropic; their structures are not.

15 Even the two most seemingly surreal stories in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* – "Why Don't You Dance?" and "Viewfinder" – reveal consistent and interrelated symbolic structures. Both stories are about how a man will respond when his home, indeed his life, is under attack. The two men react in very different ways: one story ends in stasis, the other in at least potentially meaningful action.

16 In "Why Don't You Dance?" an unnamed man hauls his furniture and an extension cord out into the driveway. A boy and girl, who are furnishing their own small apartment, happen by and begin to sample the man's belongings: significantly, the boy turns the man's blender to "MINCE" (4), then later "for no good reason" turns on the reading lamp (5). There is "no telling" in the artificial light surrounded by darkness whether the younger couple is nice or nasty (8), but when the girl dances with the man she correctly recognizes the man's desperation, and it fills her with a dread that eventually drives her to silence (10).

17 But while the characters may be reduced to silence, Carver's rhetoric is clear. Without a meaningful home to surround them, the domestic items arranged in the driveway lose their significance and disintegrate. The girl who is just starting to furnish her own apartment (and life) understands this at some level: "There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out" (10). Carver won't furnish her with the words, but he does

furnish his reader with the symbolic structures that will make sense of that silence. Artificial light (the lamps) or pictures (television) or sound (the record-player) or intimacy (the bed and couch), Carver seems to be saying, can't hold back the darkness, even as the objects of a relationship can't create or sustain the relationship or stave off the despair of its dissolution.

18 "Viewfinder" poses perhaps the greatest challenge to this case for Carver's structured and meaningful symbolism. Certainly its plot details – a photographer who has no hands, a narrator who ends up on the roof throwing rocks at nameless targets for no apparent reason – are the stuff of surrealism. Similarly, its images – an instant camera that can reduce the man's suffering into an instantly created commodity or the narrator's voyeurism in which he betrays interest in the photographer only to commodify the photographer's handicap – are the stuff of postmodern alienation. But the test of the story's underlying aesthetics is whether Carver undergirds the story with sufficiently reliable symbolic structures to reinforce, rather than deliberately frustrate, the story's theme. Carver's symbolic objects do seem to point to a consistent pattern. The narrator is desperately trying to make a connection with the photographer because both men are the casualties of absent families. The narrator has been alone and is distressed because the camera's viewfinder has pinned him inside his suffering (12). He emerges to objectify his rage in response to the photographer's offer of sympathy (14), then tries to stave off his alienation by posing for a series of pictures. Ultimately, the narrator is able to share one significant thing about his story: "The whole kit and kaboodle. They cleared right out," he tells the photographer (14). That admission leads him to the roof, where he finds it "okay" (15) and he summons further strength to confront his suffering. There, he acknowledges evidence of attack (rocks that the kids have lobbed into his chimney) and responds to that attack by throwing "the son of a bitch" (a rock, though certainly a significant choice of epithet seeing as how it has lain in a "nest" on his roof) "as far as I could throw it" (125). Carver seems to suggest that the narrator's throwing the rock frees him, at least temporarily, from the status of impotent object. "I don't do motion shots," the photographer shouts in an ironic salute to the narrator's potency (15). But the narrator is no longer pinned by the camera's viewfinder (15), no longer a motionless loner trapped inside an edifice of alienation.

19 If "Viewfinder" resists the kind of simple symbolic structure characteristic of a "Popular Mechanics" or a "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," the objects in the story (the rocks, the camera, the house itself) clearly are endowed with significance that points toward, rather than deliberately frustrates, the story's overall theme. And, when evaluated in the context of a writing career in which story after story is built around meaningful symbolic structures, "Viewfinder" is hardly convincing evidence that Carver spurns metaphor (Chénetier 186) or, as Saltzman suggests, treats objects in his fictions as sources of "ambiguity, unpredictability, and disorder" (Zavarzadeh 66).

20 Carver, not surprisingly, would have told us this all along had we listened to him. As early as 1981, the year he published *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Carver spoke in "A Storyteller's Shoptalk" of how he tried to use objects and details in his fiction. His definitions underscore the evidence he left us in his stories; his underlying theory sounds nothing like Zavarzadeh's theory of "ambiguity, unpredictability, and disorder." The correct uses of facts, Carver contends:

> bring to life the details that will light up the story for the reader. For the details to be concrete and convey meaning, the language must be accurate and precisely

> given. The words can be so precise they may even sound flat, but they can still carry; if used right, they can hit all the notes. (9, 18)

21 In his essay, "On Writing," collected in 1983 in *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories*, Carver makes much the same point:

> It's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things – a character, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring – with immense, even startling, power. (15)

22 Finally, Carver, in his introduction to *The Best American Short Stories 1986*, which he collected and co-edited, reveals his predilection for the unambiguous, referential fact:

> I'm drawn to traditional (some would call it old-fashioned) methods of storytelling: ...I believe in the efficacy of the concrete word, be it noun or verb, as opposed to the abstract or arbitrary or slippery word.... I tried to steer away from...stories where the words seemed to slide into one another and blur the meaning. (XV)

23 The consistency of Carver's theoretical management of facts is rather striking. Similarly, his stories – from the *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* collection to the *Cathedral* collection – evidence no radical shift in Carver's theory of factual symbolism.

24 These conclusions shed light on an oft-quoted Carver remark that can, at first, be confusing. In 1983, Carver told *Paris Review* interviewer Mona Simpson that his short story "Cathedral" was

> totally different in conception and execution from stories that have come before.... There was an opening up when I wrote the story. I knew I'd gone as far the other way as I could or wanted to go, cutting everything down to the marrow, not just to the bone. Any farther in that direction and I'd be at a dead end – writing stuff and publishing stuff I wouldn't want to read myself, and that's the truth. (210)

25 We may quarrel with Carver's use of the term "totally different" since both what came before this change and what came after clearly are recognizable as Carver stories. Certainly, "Cathedral" is a vastly different story from any that are collected in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, but not because its theory of significant facts has changed. The distinction is that characterization and plots are expanded, while Carver, on occasion, allows himself an optimistic vision that seemed impossible fo him to express earlier.

26 Many critics (Bugeja, Facknitz, Lohnquist, Saltzman, Shute, Stull) have detailed that change, normally by contrasting the spare, pessimistic "The Bath" with its expansive, optimistic revision published in *Cathedral* as "A Small, Good Thing." Of these critics, Stull perhaps offers the most provocative reading of the two stories. He argues that "The Bath" represents Carver as an artist "absent from the world, which is discontinuous, banal, and, by definition, mundane" (7), while in "A Small, Good Thing," Carver uses "a subtle but persuasive pattern of religious symbols...concerned with the two most basic Christian sacraments, baptism and communion" (11-12).

27 Although there is much to recommend Stull's analysis, his and other critics' underestimation of Carver's earlier symbolic commitment to his work leads to over-correction in the *Cathedral*-era stories. The artist was never "absent from the world" – to borrow Stull's words (7). Theme, as well as depth of characterization, may be changing between his earlier and later work, but Carver has always been willing to charge into a story symbolic lance at the ready. For example, in "The Bath," Ann Weiss and her husband are led on a symbolic path toward miscommunication and unwashed

gracelessness just as surely as they are led toward the healing communion and grace of fresh-baked bread in the subsequent "A Small, Good Thing."

28 In "The Bath," Ann Weiss and her husband both come home from the hospital at separate times to take a bath after their "birthday boy" lapses into a coma. Besides endowing the bath with the significance of a title, Carver tells us straight out in the *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* version that for the father, "fear made him want a bath" (49). The bath is signaled as a powerful healing symbol in a story about accidental injury and the limits of healing power. In this story, neither the husband nor Ann Weiss experiences the symbolic regeneration of a completed bath. Her husband's bath is delayed by one vaguely threatening telephone call from a baker who has baked the "birthday boy" a cake and wants to be paid (49); moments later his actual bath is curtailed by a second anonymous call (50). When Ann Weiss comes home later, her bath is delayed by yet another call – this one as cryptic as the ones which have interrupted her husband. She never bathes, and the story ends in the midst of yet another seemingly meaningless cycle of interruption and despair (56).

29 To argue that Carver endows the bath with no significance or that the significance is not clear is to miss entirely the point of the story. If the bath has no symbolic significance, then it doesn't matter if the characters bathe or not. But, of course, it does matter. The very alienation and misunderstanding that occasions the telephone calls will deny Ann Weiss and her husband the ritual healing that they most need. Carver is deeply involved here, down to managing symbolic details as small as the Weiss' dog running "in circles on the grass" or the car's engine "ticking" in circular, decaying motion (56). These details, together with the repetitive telephone calls and the doctor's mismanagement of healing language, combine to advance the story's theme.

30 Similarly, in "A Small, Good Thing," Carver never releases the Weiss family from its relentless march toward the story's moral conclusion. Here, a hit-and-run driver has been added to the plot, creating yet a third possibility for the source of the telephone messages. In this version, Scotty dies and the Weiss' need for healing is even more explicitly drawn. In his perceptive analysis, Bugeja wonders why the Weiss family never contacts the police about the calls they believe might emanate from a hit-and-run driver (76). The answer, of course, is that Carver is after far more here than a police investigation might provide, and thus it does not suit his purpose to burden his story with realistic detail. It is the big, symbolic finish he is after, and he creates it as surely as he did in "The Bath," where healing baths were interrupted, where dogs ran in circles, and where engines ticked into inaction and decay. Here, in "A Small, Good Thing," the couple confronts the baker, who apologizes for his harassing telephone calls. As in other Carver stories – both early and later, both spare and expansive – the amount and quality of symbolic light is significant. In the *Cathedral* version, the baker moves in "white, even light" (84); when healing comes it is "like daylight under the fluorescent trays of light" (89). Ultimately, as the characters munch the baker's molasses and grain bread, the "high, pale cast of light" shines in the window from a now-lit world, and "they did not think of leaving" (89), not even with their child in the hospital morgue and his hit-and-run killer on the loose.

31 While Carver's use of symbolic structures remains consistent between his earlier and later work, the more fully realized plots and character development create a rhetorical problem for which there has not yet been sufficient critical analysis. Both Bugeja and Gorra are correct to complain about the heavy-handed rhetoric in some of Carver's

Cathedral stories. Neither, however, quite pins down the problem. Bugeja dislikes endings that spring from unwieldy shifts in narrative pattern (73), while Gorra complains that Carver's style dictates, rather than shows, his characters' predicaments (256). Of the two, Bugeja seems to sense the problem without finding its cause. It is not that Carver's rhetorical control has been too *narrow*, as Gorra suggests (156-157), but that the rhetoric has controlled its characters too *broadly*, often in a way that creates the unwieldy endings of which Bugeja complains.

32 For example, Gorra argues that "Where I'm Calling From" in the *Cathedral* collection succeeds because Carver's density of detail turns his alcoholic narrator into an Everyman (157). On the contrary, the story succeeds because Carver, for once, allows his characters to live and breathe, to grope toward hesitant recovery rather than bulldozing them toward Everyman status with tightly managed symbols. The issue is not how much detail is rendered, but how tightly it is managed. A contrast of the highly successful "Where I'm Calling From" with the much less successful "Feathers" reveals this distinction.

33 If density of detail (Gorra 157) were the benchmark of Carver's success, one could easily argue that "Feathers" presents a cast of finely detailed, compelling characters unequaled in his fiction: a farmer's shy wife who plops a set of plaster chompers on her television set, the world's ugliest baby with a stack of chins, and – most particularly – an unruly peacock named Joey, who, by turns, swoops like a vulture, cries "may-awe" in an unearthly wail, rubs people's legs and gets in their way, stalks around on the roof while people are trying to eat, rattles its train like a shuffling deck of cards, and ultimately, bobs its head right under the pajama of the world's ugliest baby and tickles him on the stomach (24).

34 The problem of "Feathers" is not surfeit of detail but what Carver does with that detail. Continuing the propensity for tightly managed symbolism that has typified his fiction from its beginnings, Carver is interested in Joey, not as a character, but as a representation of desire. The moment the representation has delivered its usefulness to Carver's rhetoric, it is discarded. Thus, the peacock – which arrives in the story, unforgettably, "big as a vulture," wailing, preening, stalking, wild, possibly dangerous, unfanning a rainbow tail (8-9) – is ushered out of the story in an aside: "Joey's out of the picture," the narrator says diffidently. "He flew into the tree one night and that was it for him. He didn't come down. Then the owls took over" (26).

35 Carver's point, of course, is that anything wild or beautiful has long since been squeezed from the narrator's life and marriage by the time he tells us the story. To make that point, Carver reduces Joey – arguably one of the most vital characters he ever created – to the same level as the rest of the story's symbolic aviary: the metaphorical buzzard (7), the swan ashtray into which the narrator discards his match (11), the Old Crow whiskey that his wife swills (12), and the benighted owls that are Joey's (and the narrator's) fate (26).

36 Bugeja correctly senses the problem as one of endings, but misreads its cause as reader "confusion about the moment of narration" (78). What really happens is that as Carver has expanded the scope and detail of his narrative, he has begun to raise expectations in his readers that can no longer be satisfied with the overt management of symbolic meaning that had characterized the stories of the *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* collection. There, much of the symbolic manipulation had seemed stark and effective. But when we are asked to consider characters in all their slippery possibilities – be they a peacock or a birthday boy – we no longer are willing to dismiss them so easily as but markings on the rheostat of Carver's symbolic rhetoric. We witness the birthday boy's

death; we care about him and want to find his "hit-and-run" killer. We wonder who will tickle the ugly baby now that Joey is gone.

37 Although Carver tells us in his *Paris Review* interview that "Cathedral" was his breakthrough story, the story also seems to subject its characters to a symbolic encasement that, despite Brown's reading, is neither postmodern nor humanistic. Whether the narrator of "Cathedral" prepares us for his eventual change is at best questionable; the story's ending in sudden epiphany still strikes many careful readers as too good to be true. Is it really possible for the narrator, after a life-time of symbolic blindness, to be endowed with healing vision in a single night? And if he receives that "healing vision," why would he still sound like an unredeemed narrator for the bulk of what is clearly a retrospective narrative? Is such epiphany best generated by a televised image, even a televised image redeemed by human touch? Isn't a cathedral at the very least a curious metaphor, given its complex, and often exploitative, role in medieval society? Because the story is more fully drawn than Carver's earlier fiction, we are tempted to ask those questions even though Carver's story does not encourage an ambiguous reading. His narrator, who at first describes cathedrals as "Nothing. Cathedrals. They're something to look at on late-night TV" (226), is able to term his discovery "really something" after guiding the blind man's hand (228). Where is the rhetorical irony to undercut the narrator? Where is the televised image of medieval exploitation contested or even explored? The change that has been wrought by the narrator's symbolic experience with the cathedral is nothing if not a "universal referent" (Brown 131). And if Carver's rhetorical strategy cannot stand up to its own symbolic weight, it is certainly not because Carver's aesthetic refuses metaphor (Chénetier 186).

38 By contrast, precisely because he frees his characters from such heavy-handed rhetorical control, the Carver story that does hold up to more fully realized characterization is "Where I'm Calling From." Here, Carver manages to make the reader care about the narrator and J.P. while resisting the urge to tie everything up in a symbolically resolved ending. Several contrasts with "A Small, Good Thing" are illustrative. In the latter story, Carver merely *tells* us that the baker began to speak of loneliness, and of the sense of doubt and limitation," but in "Where I'm Calling From," Carver endows J.P. with a voice. We hear his story in its peculiar detail filtered through the narrator's consciousness. We learn about J.P.'s fall into the well, what J.P. learned from it: "nothing fell on him and nothing closed off that little circle of blue" (130). J.P. still isn't sure whether it would have been better for him to have drowned in the well (130); the narrator is even less sure what to make of it all. The characters seem to be getting stronger; then they see their breakfast-mate "on his back on the floor with his eyes closed, his heels drumming the linoleum" (128) in a seizure. We care about these characters, but Carver refuses to resolve our anxiety with an easy symbol. Unlike "Cathedral" or "A Small, Good Thing," the human touch here is tentative and real, not resolved in closed symbolic structures. A kiss is something to be cherished, something that might bring luck (143), but nothing is certain. After all, even an artist like Jack London, who could create the symbolic significance of a warming fire, died the alcoholic's death, apparently not learning enough from his own carefully wrought symbolic structures. And even after the narrator's cherished human contact with J.P. and Roxy, he has to admit: "I've got the shakes. I started out with them this morning. This morning I wanted something to drink. It's depressing...." (144). It seems, finally, that all the narrator can tell us for sure is that Roxy "loves this man who has her by the arm" and that the narrator has earned J.P.'s true

friendship (142). The rest is all too uncertain to count on, though it might suggest the route toward healing. The narrator decides to make no resolutions; he's not even sure which woman he'll call. All he can know for sure is that he'll say, "It's me" (146).

39 Here, at last, in "Where I'm Calling From," Carver presents a narrative so multi-leveled that the authorial presence seems, at last, to surrender. Is it J.P.'s story? J.P.'s interpretation of his own story? The narrator's recognition that a good story couldn't save Jack London? The narrator's decision not to rely on the easy symbolic movement of New Year's resolutions (146), but to wait for real movement, to assert his own worth in the here and now?

40 "It's me," he'll say (146). Carver can tell us no more. This, finally, is the "practical recognition of the irresolutive nature of the text," which Chénetier wants to argue is typical of all of Carver's fiction (199). This, even, is the sort of world in which facts enact "ambiguity, unpredictability, and disorder" (Zavarzadeh 66). Rejecting the easy myth-making of a tightly managed symbolic structure, Carver, for a change, will leave the significance to the reader's best lights, as the artist unhands his rheostat of symbolic control.

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ABSTRACTS

As the Reagan-era 1980s began to leak into the 1990s, literary theorists were finding shimmering traces of postmodernism across nearly every literary page. Suddenly it was fashionable to sniff out postmodernism in the unlikeliest places – even in the narratives of writers working squarely within the traditions of realistic fiction. One such writer was Raymond Carver, whose work excited something of a stir when contemporary critics began to assure each other that Carver had been a true postmodernist all along. Though I was as enamoured by the aura of postmodernism as anyone else at the time, I was not convinced that the label described Carver well. My resulting essay is presented here virtually as it originally appeared and should be read within that specific critical context – a snapshot in a debate within Carver criticism that seemed terribly important at the time. And, most of two decades later, I stand by its conclusions.

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